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SUCCESS STORY

A Young Woman Leads Her Community

Council gives resident an opportunity to forge better future for region



Photo: USAID/CAR/Mahabat Aymkulova

Gulnoz Gulzalova's interest in improving the quality of life in her city, Kara Suu, Kyrgyzstan, led to her involvement on the local economic development council.

"Through participation in the USAID-supported local development council, I am gaining new knowledge and practicing my leadership skills. I am sure that this experience will enable me to take part in creating new opportunities and hope for young people here," said Gulnoz Gulzalova, the youngest representative of her local council.

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Gulnoz Gulzalova, a 22-year-old woman living in conservative and ethnically mixed Kara Suu City, had always been interested in helping her community and peers. The city sprawls along Kyrgyzstan's border with Uzbekistan and houses the largest bazaar in Central Asia. Since the end of the Soviet period, Kara Suu has been facing an array of social and economic problems brought on by the porous border between the two countries and the influx of people from other areas of Kyrgyzstan and abroad in search of economic opportunities.

After graduating from school, Gulnoz found a clerical position at the Kara Suu city administration. "I was confident that this was an opportunity to prove to myself and others that I can be a leader," she said. While she enjoyed learning the inner workings of the local government, the young woman still felt a bit frustrated by its nature. "I wanted to be more directly involved, to help the people that came into the administration every day, seeking answers and hope for a new opportunity," she said.

Gulnoz's chance to shine came when USAID began working with Kara Suu and neighboring villages to set up a local economic development council that would identify, plan, and lead implementation of economic development projects for the area. Gulnoz asked to be considered as a representative for youth development and, to her surprise, was elected as one of the council's three representatives for Kara Suu City.

Together with other members, Gulnoz received training on how to conduct a labor market assessment and carried out market research on the sewing industry in the city. "I was certain that we should open new sewing workshops," Gulnoz said. "But the assessment showed that we need to help the existing shops by improving the quality of their work and encouraging smaller businesses to collaborate and increase their competitiveness in the local economy."

Gulnoz said, "Unemployment is the source of many of the social and security related problems in this community." As a voting member, she now has the chance to vote on projects that can address at least some of the problems.